THE DELUGE

By DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS, Author of "THE COST," etc.

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CHAPTER XXII.—Continued.

"You scoundrel!" she hissed, her whole body shaking and her carefully-cultivated appearance of the gracious evening of youth swallowed up in a black cyclone of hate. "You gutter-plant! God will punish you for the shame you have brought upon us!"

I opened the door and bowed, without a word, without even the desire to return insult for insult—had not Anita evidently again and finally rejected them and chosen me? As they passed into the private hall I rang for Sanders to come and let them out. When I turned back into the drawing-room, Anita was seated, was reading a book. I waited until I saw she was not going to speak. Then I said: "What time will you have dinner?" But my face must have been expressing some of the joy and gratitude that filled me. "She has chosen!" I was saying to myself over and over.

"Whenever you usually have it," she replied, without looking up.

"At seven o'clock, then. You had better tell Sanders."

I rang for him and went into my little smoking-room. She had resisted her parents' final appeal to her to return to them. She had cast in her lot with me. "The rest can be left to time," said I to myself. And, reviewing all that had happened, I let a wild hope send tenacious roots deep into me. How often ignorance is a blessing; how often knowledge would make the step falter and the heart quail!

XXIII.

BLACKLOCK ATTENDS FAMILY PRAYERS.

During dinner I bore the whole burden of conversation—though burden I did not find it. Like most close-mouthed men, I am extremely talkative. Silence sets people to wondering and prying; he hides his secrets best who hides them at the bottom of a river of words. If my spirits are high, I often talk aloud to myself when there is no one convenient. And how could my spirits be anything but high, with her sitting there opposite me, mine, mine for better or for worse, through good and evil report—my wife!

She was only formally responsive, reluctant and brief in answers, volunteering nothing. The servants waiting on us no doubt laid her manner to shyness; I understood it, or thought I did—but I was not troubled. It is as natural for me to hope as to breathe; and with my knowledge of character, how could I take seriously the moods and impulses of one whom I regarded as a child-like girl, trained to false pride and false ideals? "She has chosen to stay with me," said I to myself. "Actions count, not words or manner. A few days or weeks, and she will be herself, and mine." And I went gaily on with my efforts to interest her, to make her smile and forget the role she had commanded herself to play. Nor was I wholly unsuccessful. Again and again I thought I saw a gleam of interest in her eyes or the beginnings of a smile about that sweet mouth of hers. I was careful not to overdo my part.

As soon as we finished dessert I said: "You loathe cigar smoke, so I'll hide myself in my den. Sanders will bring you the cigarettes." I had myself telephoned for a supply of her kind early in the day.

She made a polite protest for the benefit of the servants; but I was firm, and left her free to think things over alone in the drawing-room—"your sitting-room," I called it. I had not finished a small cigar when there came a timid knock at my door. I threw away the cigar and opened. "I thought it was you," said I. "I'm familiar with the knocks of all the others. And this was new—like a summer wind tapping with a flower for admission at a closed window." And I laughed with a little raillery, and she smiled, colored, tried to seem cold and hostile again.

"Shall I go with you to your sitting-room?" I went on. "Perhaps the cigar smoke here—"

"No, no," she interrupted; "I don't really mind cigars—and the windows are wide open. Besides, I came for only a moment—just to say—"

As she cast about for words to carry her on, I drew up a chair for her. She looked at it uncertainly, seated herself. "When mamma was here—this afternoon," she went on, "she was urging me to—to do what she wished. And after she had used several arguments, she said something I—I've been thinking it over, and it seemed I ought in fairness to tell you."

I waited.

"She said: 'In a few days more he'—that meant you—'he will be ruined. He imagines the worst is over for him, when in fact they've only begun.'"

"They! I repeated. "Who are 'they'? The Langdons?"

"I think so," she replied with an effort. "She did not say—I've told you her exact words—as far as I can."

"Well," said I, "and why didn't you go?"

She pressed her lips firmly together. Finally, with a straight look into my eyes, she replied: "I shall not discuss that. You probably misunderstand, but that is your own affair."

"You believed what she said about me, of course," said I.

"I neither believed nor disbelieved," she answered indifferently, as she rose to go. "It does not interest me."

"Come here," said I.

I waited until she reluctantly joined me at the window. I pointed to the steeple of the church across the way. "You could as easily throw down that steeple by pushing against it with your bare hands," I said to her, "as 'they,' whoever they are, could put me down. They might take away my money. But if they did, they would only be giving me a lesson that would teach me how more easily to get it back. I am not a bundle of stock certificates or a bag of money. I am—here," and I tapped my forehead.

She forced a faint, scornful smile. She did not wish me to see her belief of what I said.

"You may think that is vanity," I went on. "But will learn, sooner or later, the difference between boasting and simple statement of fact. You will learn that I do not boast. What I said is no more a boast than for a man with legs to say, 'I can walk.' Because you have known only legless men, you exaggerate the difficulty of walking. It's as easy for me to make money as it is for some people to spend it."

It is hardly necessary for me to say I was not insinuating anything against her people. But she was just then supersensitive on the subject, though I did not suspect it. She flushed hotly. "You will not have any cause to sneer at my people on that account hereafter," she said. "I settled that to-day."

"I was not sneering at them," I protested. "I wasn't even thinking of them. And—you must know that it's a favor to me for anybody to ask me to do anything that will please you—Anita!"

She made a gesture of impatience. "I see I'd better tell you why I did not go with them to-day. I insisted that they give back all they have taken from you. And when they refused, I refused to go."

"I don't care why you refused, or imagined you refused," said I. "I am content with the fact that you are here."

"But you misunderstand it," she answered coldly.

"I don't understand it, I don't misunderstand it,' was my reply. "I accept it."

She turned away from the window, lifted out of the room—you, who love or at least have loved, can imagine how it made me feel to see Her moving about in those rooms of mine.

While the surface of my mind was taken up with her, I must have been thinking, underneath, of the warning she had brought; for, perhaps half or three-quarters of an hour after she left, I was suddenly whirled out of my reverie at the window by a thought like a pistol thrust into my face. "What if 'they' should include Roebuck!" And just as a man begins to defend himself from a sudden danger before he clearly sees what the danger is, so I began to act before I even questioned whether my suspicion was plausible or absurd. I went into the hall, rang the bell, slipped a light-weight coat over my evening dress and put on a hat. When Sanders appeared, I said: "I'm going out for a few minutes—perhaps an hour—if any one should ask." A moment later I was in a hansom and on the way to Roebuck's.

The door of Roebuck's house was opened for me by a maid—a man-servant would have been a "sinful" luxury, a man-servant might be the hireling of plotters against his life. I may add that she looked the cheap maid-of-all-work, and her manners were of the free and fresh sort that indicates a feeling that as high, or higher, wages, and less to do could be got elsewhere.

"I don't think you can see Mr. Roebuck," she said.

"Take my card to him," I ordered, "and I'll wait in the parlor."

"'Parlor's in use," she retorted with a sarcastic grin, which I was soon to understand.

So I stood by the old-fashioned coat and hat rack while she went in at the hall door of the back parlor. Soon Roebuck himself came out, his glasses on his nose, a family Bible under his arm. "Glad to see you, Matthew," said he with saintly kindliness, giving me a friendly hand. "We are just about to offer up our evening prayer. Come right in."

I followed him into the back parlor. Both it and the front parlor were lighted; in a sort of circle extending into both rooms were all the Roebucks and the four servants. "This is my friend, Matthew Blacklock," said he, and the Roebucks in the circle gravely bowed. He drew up a chair for me, and we seated ourselves. Amid a solemn hush, he read a chapter from the big Bible spread out upon his lean lap. My glance wandered from face to face of the Roebucks, as plainly dressed as were their servants. I was able to look freely, mine being the only eyes not bent upon the floor.

"I WAITED."

So absorbed was I in the study of the influence of his terrible master-character upon those closest to it, that I started when he said: "Let us pray." I followed the example of the others and knelt. The audible prayer was offered up by his oldest daughter, Mrs. Wheeler, a widow. Roebuck punctuated each paragraph in her series of petitions with a loudly-whispered amen. When she prayed for "the stranger whom Thou has led seemingly by chance into our little circle," he whispered the amen more fervently and repeated it. The prayer ended and, us on our feet, the servants withdrew; then, awkwardly, all the family except Roebuck. That is, they closed the doors between the two rooms and left him and me alone in the front parlor.

"I shall not detain you long, Mr. Roebuck," said I. "A report reached me this evening that sent me to you at once."

"If possible, Matthew," said he, and he could not hide his uneasiness, "put off business until to-morrow. My mind—yours, too, I trust—is not in the frame for that kind of thoughts now."

"Is the Coal organization to be announced the first of July?" I demanded. It has always been, and always shall be, my method to fight in the open. This, not from principle, but from expediency. Some men fight best in the brush; I don't. So I always begin battle by shelling the woods.

"No," he said, amazing me by his instant frankness. "The announcement has been postponed."

Why did he not lie to me? Why did he not put me off the scent, as he might easily have done, with some shrewd evasion? I suspected I owed it to my luck in catching him at family prayers.

"When will the reorganization be announced?" I asked.

"I can not say," he answered. "Some difficulties—chiefly labor difficulties—have arisen. Until they are settled, nothing can be done. Come to me to-morrow, and we'll talk about it."

"That is all I wished to know," said I, with a friendly, easy smile. "Good night."

It was his turn to be astonished—and he showed it, where I had given not a sign. "What was the report you heard?" he asked, to detain me.

"That you and Mowbray Langdon had conspired to ruin me," said I, laughing.

He echoed my laugh rather hollowly. "It was hardly necessary for you to come to me about such a—a statement."

"Hardly," I answered dryly. Hardly, indeed! For I was seeing now all that I had been hiding from myself since I became infatuated with Anita and made marrying her my only real business in life.

We faced each other, each measuring the other. And as his glance quailed before mine, I turned away to conceal my exultation. In a comparison of resources this man who had plotted to crush me was to me as giant to midget. But I had the joy of realizing that man to man, I was the stronger.

XXIV.

"MY WIFE MUST!"

As I drove away, I was proud of myself. I had listened to my death sentence with a face so smiling that he must almost have believed me unconscious; and also, it had not even entered my head, as I listened, to beg for mercy. Not that there would have been the least use in begging; as well try to pray a statue into life, as try to soften that set will and purpose. Still, many a man would have weakened—and I had not weakened. But when I was once more in my apartment—in our apartment—perhaps I did show that there was a weak streak through me. I fought against the impulse to see her once more that night; but I fought in vain. I knocked at the door of her sitting-room—a timid knock, for me. No answer. I knocked again, more loudly—then a third time, still more loudly. The door opened and she stood there, like one of the angels that guarded the gates of Eden after the fall. Only, instead of a flaming sword, hers was of ice. She was in a dressing-gown or tea gown, white and clinging and full of intoxicating hints and glimpses of all the beauties of her figure. Her face softened as she continued to look at me, and I entered.

"No—please don't turn on any more lights," I said, as she moved toward the electric buttons. "I just came in to—to see if I could do anything for you." In fact, I had come, longing for her to do something for me, to show in look or tone or act some sympathy for me in my loneliness and trouble.

"No, thank you," she said. Her voice seemed that of a stranger who wished to remain a stranger. And she was evidently waiting for me to go. You will see what a mood I was in when I say I felt as I had not since I, a very small boy indeed, ran away from home; I came back through the chilly night to take one last glimpse of the family that would soon be realizing how foolishly and wickedly unappreciative they had been of such a treasure as I; and when I saw them sitting about the big fire in the lamplight, heartlessly comfortable and unconcerned, it was all I could do to keep back the tears of strong self-pity—and I never saw them again.

"I've seen Roebuck," said I to Anita, because I must say something, if I was to stay on.

"Roebuck?" she inquired. Her tone reminded me that his name conveyed nothing to her.

"He and I are in an enterprise together," I explained. "He is the one man who could seriously cripple me."

"Oh," she said, and her indifference, forced though I thought it, wounded.

"Well," said I, "your mother was right."

She turned full toward me, and even in the dimness I saw her quick sympathy—an impulsive flash instantly gone. But it had been there!

"I came in here," I went on, "to say that—Anita, it doesn't in the least matter. No one in this world, no one and nothing, could hurt me except through you. So long as I have you, they—the rest—all of them together—can't touch me."

We were both silent for several minutes. Then she said, and her voice was like the smooth surface of the river where the boiling rapids run deep: "But you haven't me—and never shall have. I've told you that. I warned you long ago. No doubt you will pretend, and people will say, that I left you because you lost your money. But it won't be so."

I was beside her instantly, was looking into her face. "What do you mean?" I asked, and I did not speak gently.

(To be Continued.)

Bagley glanced at the clock and noted, with a tinge of relief, that it lacked but a few minutes of six o'clock. For several nights he had been up for hours at a time, nursing his wife. His cheeks and forehead were unnaturally hot and his eyes burned from loss of sleep.

Bagley strove to comfort himself with the old saying about the length of a lane that has no turning. Perhaps, now that his wife was to recover—but his train of thought was broken by the entrance of a customer, an old man.

Bagley glanced at the phial handed him. "Prescription No. 18497. Ten drops when necessary.—Dr. Black."

He mechanically opened the unwieldy scrap-book in which the original copies of prescriptions were pasted. He rubbed his tired eyes with his hand to enable him better to decipher the handwriting, and commenced to compound the mixture.

When ready he filled and corked the bottle, noticing that the fluid filled it completely. At that moment the night clerk came in, which left him free to go home.

As the old man, pocketing his purchase and the change, left the store, Bagley, clothed in hat and rain coat ready for home, paused to close up and put away the prescription book, which lay open near him. His head seemed clear now, and he felt relieved. He paused, his eyes suddenly attracted to the prescription he had just compounded.

In an instant he tasted the bitterness, he felt the deathly nausea, of the man who has blundered stupidly, grievously, disastrously.' A weakness approaching death stealthily overcame him, as with blanched cheek, his eyes read again the ingredients of the deadly poison. 'Prescription No. 18479, so like No. 18497, but alas! the fatal transposition!

His instinct took the initiative, while his consciousness strayed, and, by the time his normal vision had returned he had turned several pages and had commenced to compound No. 18497. Yes, he would hurry after the old gentleman, ask to see the phial, and make the exchange surreptitiously.

Tears of agonized suspense and chagrin clouded his eyes as he hurried down the street in the direction taken by the aged man, whose address, he realized almost at once, was unknown to him. But immediately he recalled the name on the label of the bottle in his hand—Dr. Black—who should know the names and addresses of his patients. The detour to the physician's office consumed precious minutes, perhaps the last minutes in the life of his innocent victim. Before the information for which he so excitedly clamored had been wholly imparted, Bagley was away on the race with his destiny, each stride of which now brought him nearer to Cherry street.

As he turned the last corner, an ambulance, on its silent tires, passed him in the opposite direction. His heart sank within him, he staggered so that his shoulder was bruised by a projection on a gate post. He had been too late! The responsibility for the loss of a human life was on his hands!

Realizing dimly, however, that there had hardly been a sufficient elapse of time, since he left the store, for the death to occur and for an ambulance to arrive, he sought and found No. 47, a somber, three-story brick structure. His impatiently repeated rings bringing no response, he entered a basement window whose catch proved defective, and, groping his way upstairs toward a light, a beam from which struck down the stairway. The stillness of the house accentuated all the dreadful possibilities that his imagination, aided by circumstances of convincing sequence, had conjured up.

The light of the bedroom, into which he stepped, blinded him for a moment, but his eager glance found him at once the unconscious form of the aged man, still clothed, stretched on the bed. Near at hand, on a small table, stood a number of bottles containing drugs. The breathing of the sufferer was labored and fitful, such as that of a person near to death.

Having the exchange of phials, which he had planned, clear in his mind, he slipped the bottle he picked up into his pocket, leaving, among the others on the table, the one he had brought with him.

His way home led across a bridge, within a hundred yards of his home, and at the center of the arch he paused, prompted to hurl the sinister phial over the parapet. An arc-lamp, high above him on its tall pedestal, illuminated the place glaringly.

Gods! His lip curled in a wolfish snarl of desperation, and the tinkle of breaking glass at his feet sounded an uncanny signal for the black curtain of despair. For the label, which had just met his gaze, had been unfamiliar! The poison still stood within easy reach of the old man at No. 47 Cherry street!

As he entered his house, evading his wife's sympathetic, anxious questions, choked down a bit of supper, and strove to talk rationally with her, the chaos of his thoughts almost overcame his assumed calmness. At last, urged beyond endurance against inaction, he hurried out into the welcome darkness and mist.

The stumbling, dogged walk, into which he fell, led him he knew not where.

Some time later in the evening, a hearty voice awoke him to a sense of his surroundings. It was that of Billings, a newspaper friend. What was he doing 'way over here on Cherry street at this hour on such a night, when he might be snug at home with the prettiest little woman in town? As for himself, O, he had just written up a suicide case at No. 47. Overdose of laudanum, morphine, or some drug, so the coroner had just decided. Well, he must say good night and hurry on.

As Billings left, Bagley put his hand weakly to his throbbing head. Cherry street. Suicide. No. 47? A sob burst from his throat, his chin dropped to his breast. The drug had done its work! The secret was no longer his! The incriminating phial was in the hands of the police!

Now that he had heard what he had feared to hear, it seemed as though his last, feeble flicker of spirit wavered and was puffed out. He staggered on down the street. In the darkness he discerned a group of police, with a wagon at the curb before No. 47. The door was slammed and locked by a man who ran quickly down the steps, and all entered the vehicle, which disappeared into the darkness.

Mechanically Bagley entered the gate, and, passing to one side, reached the rear, and stumbled over what seemed to be a small pile of rubbish recently deposited by the police who had just left.

His abrupt movement, in recovering his balance, dislodged his hat, and the light of the match he used to recover it fell on the rubbish pile. Several bottles, such as contain drugs, lay in sight, many of them labeled Morphine or Laudanum. The coroner had spoken of these two! One bottle at his feet caught his eye, and he took it into his hand as the match fell to the ground.

His whole figure became rigid as he read the label, but not with the rigidity of suffering. As the match burned and blistered his finger-tips, he still stared at a bottle, as yet uncorked and full of a poisonous drug—Prescription No. 18479.

IN AN ICEBERG PRISON.

Marvelous Play of Colors on Sides of the Ice Mountains.

We had scarcely taken a dozen strokes when we discovered ourselves to be in the midst of a plunging fleet of icebergs. Observing an opening between two bergs that we concluded must lead to open water, we pulled through it.

A sea rolled up, the opposing sides of the bergs came together with a crash that shook tons of ice into the sea. The next moment found us completely surrounded by some dozen enormous icebergs, held together by their cohesive force.

The white and abrupt walls that hemmed us in were at first but dimly perceived; but gradually the interior of our ice prison became clear of all vapor, and we saw that the bases of the bergs were marked by sharp, shelving projections that slashed into the water with the whirling movement of mammoth reapers; and by long, deep gorges into which the sea launched itself with a sullen lunge.

Along their summits stood a thousand spires, ranging from giant icicles to towering peaks. Rivulets and diminutive cataracts poured down through the fissures and gorges they had fashioned, for the sun had now reached its zenith.

A series of many colored ribbons—red, orange, green, blue, indigo and violet—conforming to the convexities and hollows, in lines zigzag, vertical and horizontal, stretched themselves along the faces of the icebergs. Around transparent colonades, serpentine folds of light wound and unwound.

An obelisk, leaning from the abrupt side of a gorge, one moment wore a coronet that glowed like a ruby, then it gleamed like an emerald. On a crystal dome an Aurora slept.

The bergs nodded, heaved; the rainbow hued ribbons wavered, danced, ran into each other. A stronger impulse of the ocean that set all the bergs plunging and leaping, and the Aurora slipped from the dome, pursued by a flight of golden spears; the colors mingled, unraveled and again merged until the bergs from base to summit were bathed in an iridescent uproar of flaming color.—New England Magazine.

Observant Man.

It is a popular belief that no men "understand dress;" still, it should be known that they have a sort of rough appreciation of general effects. They can distinguish between the woman who dresses well by instinct and one who does so with an effort. They are able to recognize at a glance the girls and women who go through life in the wrong kind of garments and wearing hats which infatuation has impelled them to buy against their better judgment.—Lady's Pictorial.

Another One on Chicago.

First Vassar Girl—That Miss Smith from Chicago got a magnificent touring car for a Christmas present.

Second Vassar Girl—Hung up her stocking for it, I suppose.